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Week of
August 24, 1942

Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

1942

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of August 24, 1942.*
†"Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning" and "Talking to You" opened Monday, August 17th, at the Belasco Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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"Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning"
"Talking to You"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
August 18, 1942

Saroyan Stages a Double Funeral

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE Saroyan Theater got going Monday night, but not, I'm afraid, with any eclat. Its first two offerings take two hours to play, which is a good deal longer than they must have taken to write. They are both so hopelessly bad that it is of no great importance that *Talking to You* is decidedly the worse. For, on the other hand, *Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning* is decidedly the longer. Out of the wreckage there is, indeed, nothing whatever to salvage except the excellent acting and winning personality of Canada Lee.

Across the Board is a kind of eighth-rate *Time of Your Life*. The scene again is a bar and the characters are almost as assorted and Saroyanesque. There are those sweet-smelling indispensables, the kind-hearted bartender and the warm-hearted taxi driver. There is Maxwell Bodenheim, fished out of his Village haunts to play a dancing poet and recite a dreadful poem. There are a woman in childbirth, two Filipino dishwashers, and a philosophizing waiter who steps before the curtain after the manner of Frank Craven in *Our Town* and juggles the eternal verities. Fortunately Canada Lee plays the waiter, and speaks his piece with a good deal of charm and persuasiveness.

The play has an occasional spot of humor or flash of phrase; but the verve and buoyant vaudevilism of *The Time of Your Life* are entirely missing. Saroyan is trying to show that there is no life left in people, that they merely repeat one another and bask in the illusion of living. But he says in a mere spate of words, words that not only make no sense, but that contain no poetry. And having said it, with his usual boozy optimism he blithely prettifies it up by saluting the future—by betting across the boards on tomorrow morning.

Talking to You is a maudlin and melodramatic piece of drivel about the goodness and evil in the world, liberally interlarded with What's it All About and Why Must Such Things Be, and such catchpenny characters as a blind man, a deaf child, and a midget Storm Trooper. Through the verbal fog of both plays swirls Saroyan's mania for soul-saving through Love, and the feeling he provides of having acquired a monopoly on kindliness. But that instead of poetizing about life, he should really *represent* it, never seems to occur to him. That he should really try to discover what it's all about or why such things must be is apparently asking too much of him. The messy playwright and the windy visionary are the least of all this. It is the Saroyan who pretends to be responsible and is actually frivolous and self-indulgent that makes one really impatient.

Mr. Saroyan has also elected to stage the show, with the result that nobody in it but Canada Lee gives any sort of performance.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
August 18, 1942

Bill Saroyan's Theatre Opens With Two Curious Dramas

"Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning," fantasy, and **"Talking to You,"** drama, by William Saroyan. Produced by the author at the Belasco Theatre, New York, Aug. 17, 1942.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

ALL William Saroyan's friends, all his critics, are agreed that the boy is trying to say something in the theatre. What it is no one has yet been able exactly to figure out, but the mystery that attaches to it is fascinating and exasperating by turns.

Last night at the Belasco, now boldly plastered with a new sign reading "The Saroyan Theatre," Mr. Saroyan tried two of his later works upon a first audience.

"Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning" is called. "Talking to You" is the other. The first has its setting in a sort of restaurant-bar, through which life flows, and jams, and flows again, to the wonder and surprise of a dozen mystified humans.

The second is set in a basement in which a colored prizefighter is training. Here another half dozen befogged acquaintances gather to gape and wonder and meditate, if possible. Canada Lee, the colored actor, is the featured player in both plays.

The Touch of Mystery

"Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning," it appears, acquired its trick title from the fact that there was a race horse named Tomorrow Morning which both a waiter and a cabbie "played across the board."

But it is a title that is no doubt also tied in mystically in the author's mind with the illusions and realities of life that are troubling him.

Pirandello-like, Mr. Saroyan would know what is man and the spirit of man. And why? Whence cometh and whither drifteth the poor bum?

Nothing is as it seems; nothing can be as it seems. If it is, what the heck? And why?

His mouthpiece is the philosophical waiter, originally played by a white man (Oliver Pickett) in Pasadena, now taken over most ably and eloquently by Mr. Lee.

Canada as a Waiter

Twice during the action Lee steps out of character and before the curtain to explain, or try to explain, his author's search for a meaning to life.

When he steps back into the play his adventures range from an exchange of characters with a guest who insists on playing waiter, to those of an unhappy participant in the birth of a baby, the mother being delivered of a precipitant son by one of the Filipino dishwashers in the kitchen.

"Tomorrow Morning" is even more casual than was "The Beautiful People," and not often as eloquent in word or mood. But it also has its moments, and the Saroyanists seemed quite delighted with it.

In "Talking to You" Mr. Saroyan is dipping again into the occult primers. This time he toys with the idea that Blackstone Boulevard, an ignorant colored prizefighter, is so fine in spirit that he cannot hurt those whom he instinctively knows to be good. And that, my worthies, is a considerable handicap to a would-be killer.

Blackstone is also so kindly a person, and so hungry for affection, that he adopts a little deaf white boy as his brother, and takes his spiritual instruction from a blind man known as The Tiger.

Canada Lee's poise and apparent understanding of both these Saroyan tasks was exceptional, and his acting entirely convincing in its simple directness.

The others did as they had been told to do, and were acceptable. Saroyan actors. Maxwell Bodenheim, the poet, shadow boxed with one of his own poems, "Jazz Music."

The settings are by Cleon Throckmorton and interesting. Lois Bannerman played a harp quite beautifully and the Saroyan audience, as said, was evidently well pleased.

NEW YORK POST
August 18, 1942

Saroyan Struts His Stuff At the Belasco Theatre

By RICHARD MANSON

A GUSHER of crude Saroyan has come into the Belasco Theatre and the first samples were put on display last night—a matter of two short plays called "Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning" and "Talking to You." Are they good? What is good? . . . Are they bad? Is anything bad? . . . What do they mean? What does life mean? . . . The answers, if you please, are all by Mr. Saroyan himself, drama's Billy the Kid, who recognizes no laws or conventions and is devilishly clever at merchandising jiffy-jell capsules of the emotions of the little people in the human comedy.

You may resent his air for making a pulse-hopper out of the commonplace and obvious, like a pitchman glorifying the simple potato peeler, but the curiosity shop of Saroyan knick-knacks is enormously effective. He spills so much bait on the thespian waters that the "chumming" must needs attract you. His wares may have the glamour of a five-and-ten-cent store but they are persistently arresting. The technique looks like a swindle but the result is

is set in Callaghan's, a cafe on East 52nd Street. Mr. S. is very partial to bars because he has discovered that shabby little people have a way of achieving ten-second nobility in them. . . . The curtain goes up on a harpist (Lois Bannerman) giving out with the strings on a lofty perch unrelated to the setting. . . . A waiter (Canada Lee) is reading a paper and suddenly discovers the audience—and chats. . . . In fact, he introduces his boss . . . and the boss tosses off an Irish ditty . . . and a customer comes in and they get back to work.

The Beautiful People

The continuity is a jig-saw puzzle that defies analysis. A customer insists on serving dinner to the waiter. . . . The Filipino dishwashers come out of the kitchen to engage a banker in sociological argument. . . . A girl gives birth to a baby in the joint . . . and the baby grows to manhood before the bartender finishes washing his glasses. . . . Saroyan has no patience with time and space . . . he even has the illusion of reality pricked for a spell and the street disappears.

"Tomorrow Morning," incidentally is the name of a horse that a taxicab driver is playing across the board because he likes the name. But the playwright finds "man's presumption on tomorrow's dawn" a bit of boldness. . . . In fact, he tells you that his "beautiful people" stink . . . but he parades them with engaging insolence in flashy "anonymous events."

This innerness-of-the-outerness stuff may warm you under the collar, but please be reminded that his half-pint philosophy that Saroyan dishes out wholesale is enacted superbly, particularly by Canada Lee, Irving

It is difficult

director managed to convey and evoke the special flavor of this abracadabra to and in Equity's make-believers. . . . They carry the invisible message with tremendous conviction.

Even the production's amateur members are under control . . . the two hat-check lasses from the Stork Club, June Hayford and Lillian McGuinness; cafe society's Carol Marcus; that Village legend, Maxwell Bodenheim, who spouts rhymes as if he were in the privacy of the Village Vanguard.

Hors d'Oeuvre

The afterpiece, "Talking to You," has even more befuddling moments. It is peopled by the blind who see plenty, the deaf who hear their friends only, and Blackstone Boulevard (Canada Lee), a prizefighter who can sense good people and won't hurt them. . . . The seams show in this one which is climaxed by the appearance of a midget officer of the law, Nazi flavor (boy, what symbolism!).

These two gems are the forerunners of a season of Saroyan mysteries — "Afton Water," "Jim Dandy," "Get Away Old Man," "Happy Birth, Decent Funeral," "Elmer and Lily"—short ones, long ones, musicals, etc., plus five that the happy prince still has in his head but will write down in the next few hours.

We don't see any gold at the end of the Saroyan rainbow, but the product should not be missed by anyone interested in the theatre. . . . Pay no attention to the after-curtain comments like "So this is what we get for feeding starving Armenians" and "You can't get a cab in this rain—it's tomorrow morning."

There's plenty of "touche," in sly Saroyan . . . he shoots so many arrows that the draw-

"Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning"
"Talking to You"

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
August 18, 1942

Saroyan Double Bill Staged at Belasco

By JOHN ANDERSON

TO A theatre which he has officially proclaimed dead (but which he has promised to make alive again) William Saroyan brought two of his own plays last night, two plays presented "By the Saroyan Theatre" in what is otherwise locally and long celebrated as the Belasco. With its author's peculiar genius for odd titles the first is "Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning," and the second, more sedately, "Talking to You." If they are the only things between the drama and sudden death let us reconcile ourselves to the shroud, the knell, the mattocks, and the grave, pax vobiscum, not to say peace to these few gnashes.

For while I have clung (and still cling) stubbornly to the notion that Saroyan has fine and true talent for the theatre and have winked long and rather troublesome winks at his many defects, the present double bill and redoubled William, is too much for this particular ardent admirer.

I am willing to take Mr. Saroyan plain or goofy; I delight in seeing him kick the stuffy conventions of the theatre in their estimable slats while he is trying to express the inexpressible, or even when he is just letting his own exuberant exhibitionism get a strangle hold on his talent. His courage, his humanity, and his sensitive observation are as strong as they are rare, and they are cherishable qualities so that any art especially the theatre, should be grateful when they endow it.

First Boredom

But while I found "My Heart's in the Highlands" a unique and beautiful experience, "The Time of Your Life" buoyant and entertaining, and "The Beautiful People" both delicate and wise, I find myself, in the presence of these two new plays, disenchanted, doubtful, and bored. It is the first time I have found Mr. Saroyan boring.

The author's notes to the printed plays would suggest, of course, that this is my own fault, and that somehow I have failed to receive his plays as they sprang full-panoplied from the head of Fresno Jove. This may, indeed, be true. It has happened with critics before this, but I can only report the result.

Where Mr. Saroyan's work has seemed until now full of naive wonderment, of cosmic innocence and mystically cloudy but profoundly real meaning, because the author was trying to say things beyond exact words and easy dramatic definition, these seem to be merely verbally confused, carelessly incoherent, and boozily garrulous.

The first is by far the better of the two. On the expansive and talkative premises of a Fifty-second Street restaurant the usual Saroyan characters drink and loaf and invite their souls while an ethereal lady, shrouded in mosquito netting, strums a harp occasionally to lend suitable emphasis to the soulful nature of the proceedings, where a Negro waiter discourses amiably to the audience, and where Mr. Maxwell Bodenheim, in his first stage appearance, recites somewhat jaggedly a poem of his very own called "Jazz Music."

Speakeasy Talk

After an hour of what sounds sometimes like bleary speakeasy talk, with a few fine passages of true Saroyan probing, it is revealed that they all confront the end of the world's illusion, that they are all dead, because "the glue that held the illusion together has run out." Possibly my own sense of poetic imagery is dead, but I thought Mr. Saroyan's poverty stricken.

The second playlet is mainly about a Negro prize fighter who can't hurt anybody he sees is good, who is tricked into fighting a midget dressed in the Hitler regalia, and who, finally is left dead on the stage by the people he tried to save. It is an obvious and banal allegory redeemed in its better moments, by the superb performance of Canada Lee, the young Negro actor hitherto noted for his work in "Haiti" and "Native Son."

Mr. Lee is, in fact, the hero of the evening, for his before-the-curtain talks in "Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning" are as direct, winning, simple, and ingratiating as his whole performance is full of energy and fine spirit.

There are other notably good performances under the author's own direction, particularly by Edward F. Nannery, Irving Morrow, Lewis Charles, and William Prince. Mr. Throckmorton's two settings are as roofless, placeless, and ventilated as the Saroyan imagination and, I fear, in this particular instance, just about as empty.

'ACROSS THE BOARD ON TOMORROW MORNING'

A play by William Saroyan; settings by Cleon Throckmorton; presented by the Saroyan Theater at the Belasco on August 17 1942. The cast:

Harpist	Lois Bannerman
Thomas Piper	Canada Lee
Jim	Bill Challee
John Callaghan	Edward F. Nannary
Harry Mallory	Irving Morrow
Helen	Jane Jeffreys
Peggy	June Hayford
Lois	Carol Marcus
R. J. Pinkerton	Arthur Griffin
Pablo	C. Gilbert Advincula
Pancho	Sam Sotelo
Sammy	Larry Bolton
Rhinelander 2-8182	Lillian McGuinness
Fritz	Lewis Charles
A Poet	Maxwell Bodenheim
Callaghan Mallory	William Prince

'TALKING TO YOU'

A play by William Saroyan. The cast:

The Dream Dancer	Lois Bannerman
The Crow	Peter Beauvais
The Tiger	Irving Morrow
Blackstone Boulevard	Canada Lee
The Deaf Boy	Jules Leni
Fancy Dan	Lewis Charles
Maggie	Lillian McGuinness
The Midget	Andrew Ratousheff

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
August 18, 1942

William Saroyan Opens The Saroyan Theater

By JOHN MASON BROWN

NO. Most definitely and decisively, no. Mr. Saroyan ought not to have done it. He ought to have contented himself with being interviewed. In these interviews he has kept his modesty cross-ventilated even in these hot days. In them he has put on some pretty good sideshows as a blowfish pretending to be a genius or a genius pretending to be a blowfish.

There is a difference, however, between telling the world that you are the world's greatest playwright, and proving it. Mr. Saroyan seems of late to have been so busy serving himself as his own announcer that in the last two dramas with which he opened the Saroyan Theater at the Belasco last night he has forgotten to supply either himself or his admirers with a program. Although this may not embarrass him, it does embarrass his admirers.

In My Heart's in the Highlands and The Time of Your Life, in such a recent one-act not yet seen in New York as Hello, Out tiful People, Mr. Saroyan has contributed so much to our theater in the way of originality and magic, of tenderness and freshness, of exuberance and gay melancholy that it is painful to sit before such of his very effortless efforts as Across the Boards on Tomorrow Morning and Talking to You. In them what appeared to be spring water turns out to be dish water. In them the daring young man of the flying trapeze proves to be a not so young man on a trapeze which does not fly.

* * *

Always Unpredictable

Mr. Saroyan's talent, which can rise to genius, has always been unedited, undisciplined, unpredictable. Yet at his best (which has been a most welcome and distinguished best) his faults, compared to his virtues, have been insignificant.

But in the two playlets Mr. Saroyan presented last night, Mr. Saroyan does not get away from Broadway. He merely gets back to Saroyan, and tenth-rate Saroyan at that. All the old Saroyan props are present—the barroom, the barkeep, the taxi driver, the rich man poorly drawn, the drunken Mr. Fix-it, the quest for happiness, the abandonment of realism and the reliance upon music to complete the writing. All of them are employed far less than indifferently.

Across the Boards on Tomorrow Morning is a fuzzy, dull, talky preachment about life's illusion and patterns. It benefits by the amusing introductory uses to which it puts the Our Town technique of a Stage Manager, contains its amusing characters such as Fil-pinos, and is brightened from time to time begins as a play, however, soon freezes into a pose, and what is held as pose no less quickly turns to a bore. Talking to You is a political allegory, all razzle and no dazzle, about races, the brotherhood of man and good men and blind democracies confronted with Fascist forces. Some day Mr. Saroyan may yet translate it into a play. Or, at any rate, translate it.

* * *

Canada Lee's Acting Distinguished

The evening's only recommendation is Canada Lee. He is an admirable actor, possessed of a versatility which his fine performance in Native Son did not suggest. He appears in both playlets, and does wonders with the strangely unwonderful materials Mr. Saroyan has given him. The others, including Maxwell Bodenheim who acts a Poet who should not have left his Corner, are for the most part as amateurish as Mr. Saroyan's writing and direction.

All Saroyan and no work makes a very dull play. It is tragic to see so gifted a man tempted into turning exhibitionist and faker. It is no less tragic to have his fine talents so wasted by success, bad taste and lazy haste that they become the victims of his faults. What would be good news, even in a miserable world, would be to learn that as an author Mr. Saroyan had taken Margaret Sanger as his teacher. After visiting Mr. Saroyan's rabbit-hutch, Ibsen's Workshop seems like paradise.

Even the Japanese are not rumored to consider hari-kiri a pleasant sight or to deem it a major sport. Yet artistic hari-kiri was what Mr. Saroyan was committing last night